

Ministry

This morning I'm reflecting on a single word from our Gospel reading. We just heard, in Mark 9:35, this saying attributed to Jesus: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And the word I want to concentrate on this morning is that word *servant*.

Actually, it's the underlying Greek word δῖάκονος, which is sometimes translated as *servant*. And the first thing to remember is that translating the Greek New Testament is more art than science. Each word has many possible meanings, and you almost never find that the range of possible meanings for some New Testament Greek word is exactly the same as the range of possible meanings for some equivalent word in modern English. The word δῖάκονος poses a typical translation problem--there is no English word that exactly translates it, so you have to choose among various approximations.

In the four Gospels, that word δῖάκονος is usually translated as "servant" or "attendant", and that's pretty close to the heart of the word. But we can get even closer, because a δῖάκονος is not just a servant, but a particular kind of servant. The prefix δια means *through* or *by means of*, and a δῖάκονος is a servant who is something like an intermediary or an agent or a go-between.

The classic example of a δῖάκονος is a person who serves at a table. When you wait on a table, you've got people with needs--they're hungry, they're thirsty--and you've got resources--food and drink in the kitchen--and your job as an intermediary, as a δῖάκονος, is to bring them together. You have to discern what people need, and help them get it. It's a position of responsibility, a position that requires initiative, but at the same time you're not in charge. As a δῖάκονος, you don't have to plan the menu, or cook the food, or invent new kinds of plants and animals for people to eat, or force people from the street to come in and sit down. Your responsibility is to discern what your people need, and what resources you have, and help bring them together.

A new layer of meaning was added to the word by the early Christian communities. They began to use it to refer to a specific position within the church. The δῖάκονος was the person who looked after the needs of the widows and orphans of the church community. There's still that same sense of intermediary agency; the δῖάκονος connects people who have needs to the resources of the church. I said that in the Gospels it is usually translated as *servant*, but in the New Testament letters it is often translated as *minister*. It is also the origin of our English word *deacon*.

So why am I so interested in this word this morning? It's because I think that δῖάκονος really captures something essential about ministry, for myself, for this church, and for all of us. I don't always have such a high sense of biblical authority; I don't always suggest that we should all reassess our lives just because some New Testament authors used a particular Greek word in a particular way. But this time, I think there is a really important insight here. I think it might be helpful for us to think of our ministries in terms of δῖάκονος.

I say *our ministries*, of course, because you don't have to be an ordained minister to have a ministry. One of the things that made me fall in love with my seminary was the way people there really seemed to understand this. When I first visited there, several people asked me about "my ministry," and by that they did not mean the career to which I might be admitted if I were a good student for the next three or four years; they meant the work that, in their eyes, I was obviously already doing. They knew I was writing music, and playing for the church, and preaching occasionally at my college, and as far as they were concerned that made me a minister.

And that is our attitude in the UCC, and at Open Prairie. We have, for example, our health ministries team -- so called not because the members have theological educations, but because the work they are doing is obviously a ministry -- a δῖάκονος ministry. They discern the care and healing people need, and they help people to connect with it. Discern and help: that's δῖάκονος. That's ministry. And like true δῖάκονοι, they are not ultimately in charge. They can't make people heal; they are not responsible for inventing new drugs or for performing miracles. They can't even make people get their blood pressure checked or take their meds. They discern, and they help.

Or consider our fellowship team (which, incidentally could use your help, if you're looking for a ministry to add to your life.) The work of that team is a ministry, a δῖακονία, helping people connect with the food and fellowship that we all need. Or consider our stewardship team -- they connect the financial needs of the church to our financial resources, but ultimately they are not in charge -- they can't print money, or make people give more to the church, and they don't decide what our priorities are for the money we do have. Or consider our search committee. There's δῖάκονος work for you: discern and help. They have to discern the kind of minister this church needs, and help discern the movements of the Spirit in finding a good candidate; and they have to help the person sent by God to

connect with us. They have a great responsibility, but they are not in charge; they can't pull our next pastor out of thin air. It might take them four months, or four years, and there's nothing they can do about that. They are intermediary agents; God is in charge.

Or, again, consider our mission team. Recently Kelly and I were talking about a problem there, and she gave me permission to share it with you. As co-chair of the mission team, Kelly felt that she was responsible for inventing projects for the team to do; and she felt like she was letting everyone down, because she hadn't been able to come up with anything new for several months. My advice to her was to think of herself as being more like ἀδιάκονος. I don't think it is her job, or Susan's, as mission team chairs, to invent projects, to pull them out of thin air. I think God actually takes care of that part for us.

Our job as διάκονος ministers is to discern, and to help: to discern the thing God wants to have happen, and to help it happen. So I suggested that she have a more relaxed team meeting. Break bread together--flat, circular bread with tomato sauce and cheese on top--and just talk. Stay alert for the inevitable day when God offers the next project. It might take some time; God is still speaking, but that doesn't mean God chatters nonstop. Maybe God gives us time to catch our breath now and then. But in its own time, that next project will fly right in the window; all we have to do is keep the window open for it, and be ready to help it when it arrives. (In fact, I think Bill Nelson has suggested a project, a fund-raiser for Gateway that he wants to do in Open Prairie, with the help of the mission team; so maybe that next project is already here.)

Of course it is much easier to give advice like that than to take it is to take it yourself. But I do need to think of my own ministry in that same way, as διάκονος. This has been on my mind a lot for the last several years, because I'm a seminary student. I'm trying to figure out what ministry means in the UCC, and what I think it ought to mean, and what shape my own ministry will take. I had a two-week intensive class last May called "Discernment of Call and Gifts for Ministry" that was largely devoted to such questions. I think that my ministry will involve preaching, and other kinds of creative work as well: composing, performing, doing workshops and retreats, and writing. (In fact, I'm writing a new book, just for Open Prairie; more about that another time.)

But all such creative work is, for me, really a kind of διάκονος; it is a work of service that I am not really in charge of. Reverend Gary Davis, the great blues musician, used to deny having composed his gospel songs -- he preferred to say that they were revealed to him. I don't claim divine authorship for my songs, but I do think I understand where Davis was coming from. For me, writing a sermon or writing a song is a co-creative act, and the first motion of it comes from the Spirit.

Take the sermon you're hearing right now, for example. I didn't make this stuff up -- well, not entirely. I didn't pull it out of thin air. I discerned something that seemed to want saying, and then I tried to help find a good way to say it. But that original something occurred outside of me. It occurred as a mysterious conjunction, the coming together of Kelly's question about the mission team, and the work of the Open Prairie's ministry teams, and our quest for a new pastor, and my own questions about ministry, and the word διάκονος in today's lectionary reading.

So I need to take my own advice about διάκονος work, because I sometimes feel a false pressure of being in charge. I sometimes feel that I need to squeeze out a few more pages of the book I'm writing -- as if I could do that by willing it -- as if God had no part in the process. But sometimes, the right thing for me to do is actually to wait prayerfully for the next few pages, which will fly in the window on a schedule over which I have no control.

Because the first motion is God's, because I am not in charge, because I am a διάκονος, I cannot presume to make things happen. For example: if Open Prairie invites me to speak here again, and often enough, there will eventually come a Sunday when I have nothing to say. I will keep the window open; I will try conscientiously to discern something God wants to have said; but some day, Sunday morning will roll around with me none the wiser. When that happens, when I have nothing to say, I promise you that I will say nothing. I promise, I won't pretend to be in charge. I'll play the piano while we sing all our favorite hymns, or I'll lead a silent, waiting worship in the manner of Quakers, or I'll read you the Sermon on the Mount, or something; but I won't pretend to be in charge when I am just a διάκονος. When that day comes, I'll feel better about it if I know that you have all cut yourselves some slack too.

Well, that's my word from the heart for you this morning. I recommend that you consider your life as a διακονία, a servant ministry. I don't mean just the churchy parts of your life, but the whole thing. Discerning and helping -- if you look at it that way, almost any job can be a ministry. As a waitress, as a lawyer, as a bartender, as a teacher, as a nurse, you can be about the business of discerning and helping. And I think it would be a good thing, for me and for all of us, to remember more often that we are not in charge, and to remember who is.

Dear God, thank you for all these ministries. In our lives, in our daily work, in this community, we are ready to help. Help us to see what you want to have happen. Dear God, Bird of the Spirit, we are leaving a window open for you. We hope to see you soon. Amen.

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